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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8810
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SUBJECT: NLD UNCLES AND CDA EXCHANGE VIEWS ON NEW U.S.
ADMINISTRATION, PARTY PRIORITIES, ELECTIONS

Classified By: P/E Chief Jennifer Harhigh for Reaons 1.4 (b) & (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a collegial January 20 give-and-take with members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) Central Executive Committee (CEC), aka the "Uncles," the Charge reaffirmed the USG's support for a democratic future for Burma, noting that backing for the cause of democracy in Burma is bipartisan and will surely continue under the new Administration. The Charge added that he has repeatedly made clear to senior GOB officials that creating an artificial election will not gain international respect. Burma needs genuine political reform including dialogue with the NLD and the release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi. The Uncles sought Charge's perspective concerning various aspects of Burma's political future and shared their own perspectives as well. Several Uncles indicated they want to focus on obtaining a democratic constitution rather than on elections in 2010. They said the NLD's priorities continue to be the release of all political prisoners, an inclusive political dialogue, and the recognition of the 1990 elections. The Uncles said UN efforts have yielded no tangible results thus far, and they noted that the worldwide economic crisis is beginning to take its toll in Burma. End summary.

2010 Elections: What is Meant by Free and Fair?

¶2. (C) The Charge requested the January 20 meeting as an opportunity to discuss the transition process for a new U.S. administration and to solicit views on current political developments in Burma. The Charge assured the Uncles that during all meetings he has with GOB senior officials, he stresses the need for genuine political reform, including dialogue with the NLD and ethnic groups and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners.

¶3. (C) The Uncles raised the Burma regime's new constitution and plans for elections in 2010. The Charge noted he has no guidance yet from the new Administration in Washington, but in his personal view the regime's current constitution and coming elections appear intended to preserve the role of the

military. The Charge added that he has on several occasions made clear to GOB officials that creating an artificial election will not gain international respect. He noted Foreign Minister Nyan Win's pledge to the UNGA last fall that elections in 2010 would be "free and fair." He said he has stressed to GOB Ministers that "free and fair" has real meaning to the U.S. and other international observers. Elections would need to be fully inclusive of all political actors, including current political prisoners, who would need to be freed to participate, or not, as they choose without restrictions; the process would need to permit open discussion and exhibit credible voting procedures; and all would have to respect the results.

¶4. (C) The Charge observed that the Burmese people and political leaders like the NLD will need to decide for themselves the politics of whether to participate in the lead-up to elections, thereby testing the regime's willingness to invoke international standards, or to reject the constitution and elections out of hand as a sham. In 1990, the NLD took the risk of competing, won, and gained tremendous international legitimacy that still endures; but today's regime, with its very flawed new constitution, does appear intent to control any electoral process to ensure its desired result. As of now, the Charge noted, it appears some democracy advocates are leaning toward participating, some against. The Uncles agreed that pro-democracy elements are not united on an approach. When asked about efforts to communicate among democracy groups, the Uncles noted the risk involved in any outreach.

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NLD's Public Stance on 2010

¶5. (C) Asked about the NLD's public stance on the elections, Uncle Nyunt Wai observed that the party publicly rejected the new constitution and the referendum of last May, but he acknowledged the party has not yet taken a public position on the election plan. The Uncles do intend to announce the NLD's position at an appropriate time, but not yet. Some Uncles expressed a strong preference to focus on the need for dialogue with the regime on a democratic constitution rather than to divert attention to flawed elections. The Charge observed that people with democratic sentiments look to the NLD for leadership, and the absence of guidance from the Uncles could leave a political void. He inquired whether the party has been communicating with those Burmese who are looking for a way out of the current political stalemate. In response, Nyunt Wai said it is dangerous to talk to others.

¶6. (C) According to CEC member Khin Maung Swe, released from prison along with Win Tin in September, the party's priorities are the release of prisoners (including Aung San Suu Kyi), genuine political dialogue, and recognition of the results of the 1990 elections because the party "owes" that to the people. Khin Maung Swe encouraged the incoming Obama Administration to focus on prisoner release and dialogue, rather than on sanctions as he suggested the outgoing administration had done.

UN "lost"

¶7. (C) The Charge solicited the Uncles views on UN efforts, including the thought of any more visits by Special Envoy Gambari and SYG Ban. U Nyunt Wai proclaimed that SYG Ban is "lost" and that UN efforts have not produced tangible gains. He added that the General Assembly should focus only on one topic -- the release of Aung San Suu Kyi -- rather than the long Burma agenda it usually considers. (Note: in a previous meeting, the Uncles indicated to us they would welcome a Ban visit even without preconditions since it would raise the profile of Burma's problems.)

Little Agreement on the Role of Youths

¶18. (C) When asked about the role of youths in the NLD and in politics in general, the CEC members and their colleagues shared a variety of views. One noted that youths are skittish about coming to the NLD's headquarters because to do so is dangerous; another said youths are active but undecided. Youths living in exile in particular cast "no" votes during the referendum at Burmese embassies abroad, and they express discontent in other ways. A CEC member acknowledged that some youths inside Burma are considering how to respond to the 2010 election. When asked, the Uncles declined to say what the party is attempting to do in the current restricted environment to attract more youths.

Uncles on Engagement, Humanitarian Assistance

¶19. (C) The Uncles are curious about the new administration's policy on Burma. Win Tin noted that he supports President Obama's statements about the need for "change," and he added that if the U.S. were to engage at a high level with GOB officials, it must be about "regime change." The Charge reiterated that he does not yet have guidance from the new Administration but that the need for political reform in Burma is at the core of USG policy. He added that a military intervention, which some equate with the term "regime change" is unrealistic to contemplate.

¶110. (C) When asked their views on the potential expansion of international humanitarian assistance, NLD officials had

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differing opinions. Khin Maung Swe noted that humanitarian assistance could serve to develop democratic processes; but MP-elect Than Nyein, freed from prison last September, alleged that aid intended for cyclone victims had been misappropriated, and he expressed concern that the regime could gain political advantage from assistance. The Charge noted that the USG has not been able to document any significant leakage of U.S. post-cyclone assistance, and, from visits to the Delta, it is clear Nargis victims are fully aware of who their benefactors have been (international donors) and have not been (the regime). He suggested that international assistance in the areas of health, education and food security, if provided directly to the people via NGOs, does not support, and in fact works to subvert, the regime's legitimacy.

Economic Crisis Starting to Take a Toll

¶11. (C) When asked about the effects of the global economic crisis on the party's constituents, economist and CEC member Nyunt Wai noted that although the full impact is unknown, some farmers have reported they must sell rice at a loss. Win Tin said he expects the Burmese economy to worsen, and he speculated that it could force a postponement of the planned 2010 elections.

Comment

¶12. (C) Although 92-year-old CEC Chair U Aung Shwe did not attend the meeting because his health is "weak," the other Uncles showed up in full force to engage in a healthy exchange of views. U Win Tin appeared to be running the show, and we were encouraged by his inclusiveness; he repeatedly encouraged others in the room, including more junior NLD officials, to speak up and share their views. In past meetings with the Uncles, a few CEC members usually dominated the conversation. Furthermore, we observed much more internal discussion among the CEC leaders during this meeting, leading us to surmise that the NLD leaders are still

struggling internally about their future strategy. They very understandably do not endorse the new constitution; they are battered by regime surveillance and harassment; they have little ability to communicate, even indirectly, with their leader, Aung San Suu Kyi; and they hate the thought of attempting to compete in elections with an unfair playing field. On the other hand, they acknowledge that some other pro-democracy elements, including some young politicians, may well participate. (Note: some of our contacts raise the specter that the NLD might end up left behind, though the Uncles expressed no such concern.) They seemed to welcome the opportunity to discuss thorny issues with someone other than themselves, though, throughout, the Charge emphasized that his thoughts were merely his own, without Washington instruction, and that, of course, the NLD and the people, not any outsiders, will have to make the tough judgments about many aspects of politics in Burma, including the 2010 elections.

DINGER